TOWN GHOSTS

A Silent Woods Story by

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For everyone who feels that they don't have a home.

Town Ghosts

"… So you see, that's why our museum is so important. Without our work to preserve the few artifacts we have from the old settlement our towns are built on, a whole chapter of our history would simply fade away with the wind." The dark-haired woman concluded, her face becoming solemn and showing the tired wrinkles around her dark eyes. Then she broke back into a customer service smile. "We have tours of the old farm and churchyard, starting at noon and ending at 7 in the evening, with an on site settlers' dinner for reservations. Thank you for taking the tour with me today, enjoy your visit to Pryeville and Sowridge."

The whole tour group clapped. My dad pulled me along to look at some of the fragments of tombstones they had behind glass. I was glad to have an out from the awkward conversation my mom and aunts were going to make with the museum's owner, but I didn't see the point in looking at the tombstones.

"I mean, it's interesting," I clarified to my dad, "but they don't have any complete dates or even names. We're just looking at rocks."

He nodded thoughtfully. "It is odd. But we should still honor the dead."

"But who are they anyway?"

"Weren't you listening?"

I pouted. "No."

He ruffled my hair before I could pull away. "Nobody knows," he said spookily.

I rolled my eyes and shoved his arm gently. "C'mon."

"No, really, nobody knows. If you'd read the plaque," he tapped it with a finger.

I glanced at it. "Oh," I mumbled.

"You should really do some reading on the towns, since we're moving in," he teased. I could tell he was smiling under his mask. "Anyhow, I'll be in the car. I'm tuckered."

I watched him as he wheeled his oxygen tank across the very small museum. It bumped along the old wood floor, which bent like paper that was wet and dried a hundred times. The bell on the door tinged as he left. I sighed under my breath, looking back down at the plaque, but unable to focus on the words. We'd just moved from our home in downtown Ottawa to here, in the middle of nowhere, a town so small there wasn't a fire department or police station. My mom and I knew it was for his lungs, but he thought it was because she got transferred to the early education program out here. Truth is, she is that program, she's starting it up to support us out here.

"Marnie? Hello?" Aunt Lisa's voice broke my thoughts.

"Sorry!"

"I was just trying to tell you we're going to head back for lunch before we leave you to get ready for school tomorrow," she chided, "but if you're so interested in that display you can stay here."

I frowned and my face flushed. She left before I could say anything, so I followed my mom out after thanking the museum owner. In the car on our way to one of the two only restaurants

in Pryeville, I realized I never caught her name, even though it was written on her name tag.

* * *

When I got the news last summer that I'd failed grade seven, I didn't even think that was possible. I came home to Dad's tiny, run down house, crushed between the hardware store, Kilkenny's, parking lot and the lawns around the market square and church. I didn't think it was possible to open the door.

But Dad found me anyway.

I spent the summer working at Kilkenny's, even though I wasn't old enough, because Dad was owed a favor. So I worked all summer and didn't earn a dime.

Sitting in my room a week before school started, I pushed open the window and lay back on my bed, head nearly lolling out over the windowsill, watching the hay field two roads over. The wind cut rippling lines in the pasture. On the highway a blue car sped past. I breathed in the fragrant, warm air. It didn't take long for me to smell dinner. I counted down the minutes until Dad called me to eat. One, two, three, four, five, six, seven…

I sat up when I heard the chair scraping loudly against the linoleum floor. Rolling out of bed, I squeezed past my dresser and nearly tripped over my box of computer parts as I left my room. Stepping softly down the hallway before pausing at the landing, I waited again for him to call, but he never did.

I returned to my room. I sat at my desk and started a third reread of the library's latest and best volume on how to build a computer.

It was another couple hours til I felt hungry, anyway.

* * *

When I woke up for my first day of school here, I was afraid. I was starting grade eight. I had left all my social blunders, my friends, my inside jokes, my bullies, in Ottawa. I had five years to gain it all back here, and it would be much worse. As an outsider, especially a city kid moving into a small country town, I'd be the butt of every joke. That's even before they find out about me having ADHD. Though I guess it won't take that long. I don't hide it well.

Twenty minutes after my alarms went off, I was still in bed. My mom knocked at my door.

"Are you getting up, sweetie? School's today."

"Yeah," I croaked, then cleared my throat and crawled out of bed to silently get dressed.

"Are you feeling okay?"

"Of course," I said, putting on a bright and chipper voice. "I'm excited to go!"

I could see her smile in my mind's eye.

"I love you sweetie. Marshmallow pancakes are waiting on the table."

That woke me up. After speeding through my morning routine in the bathroom, I blundered down the stairs of the old farmhouse to the big kitchen. We'd only been here about a week and I'd gotten used to things pretty quickly: the bathroom upstairs is better for brushing teeth because the water tastes nicer, the downstairs one has a deeper tub. The stairs creak on every step but the last. I don't even run into the door frames like I had when we last moved.

My mother had set the kitchen table beautifully: the red and white gingham tablecloth was smoothed down over the large, wooden table in the center of the room. The three plastic place mats were set with a plate of marshmallow pancakes each, and a pitcher of real maple syrup sat in the middle of the table. Dad was already eating while my mother washed the pan and the mixing bowl, glancing out the open door.

"What are you looking at?" I asked, scooting the chair back to sit down.

"Birds! They're all over the backyard. I threw seed down."

"Do you wanna go look at the birds with me?" I asked Dad.

"Another time, sweetie. I'm sure your mother won't run out of birdseed any time soon."

While we ate, I talked to my dad about nothing, keeping a worried eye on him. He looked tired. I know my mother had told me not to expect a miracle, but a sign would have been nice.

* * *

On the first morning of my second go at grade seven, I hovered awkwardly outside the big school building, clutching the straps of my bag so hard my knuckles were white. It was way early, earlier than any other student had reason to be here, so I was safe. For now. I didn't know what I'd do when kids started showing up. I couldn't exactly skip class without Dad finding out. Kicking a rock against the wall, I tried not to let myself panic.

"Excuse me," said a voice I didn't know, "where's the principal's office?"

I turned around to see an older lady, tall and well dressed, her

hair up in a messy bun. I had no idea who she was. I asked her name.

She smiled. "I'm Mrs. O'Connor. I'm going to be running a daycare and after hours childcare program here. My family and I just moved here from Ottawa, so I don't know my way around yet."

"Uh, it's through that door," I pointed around the corner. "There's a sign. Can't miss it."

"Thank you," she said, turning to leave. Then she paused, looking back at me, and asked, "I'm sorry, I never got your name?"

"Edgar."

"Thank you, Edgar. Have a great first day of school!"

* * *

"Everyone, please welcome our new classmate," the teacher, Mrs. Bunsey, said as she guided me to the front of the class. "Marnie O'Connor."

The class was small, and the room was not big enough for it. Almost everyone there had a strong tan from working in the sun, and thick, muscular arms from doing farm chores. There was a group of boys caught in a shoving match, all wearing loose jerseys. A trio of girls huddled against the wall, lazily filing their nails, who wore tall black boots and skinny jeans, and long black jackets. Two boys sat together, fiddling with something I couldn't quite see. In the back of the room were girls who looked like my friends from Ottawa: gangly, bookish, in slightly worn clothes, chatting and giggling together. One of them was in a particularly bad fit of laughter. I wondered if I could sit with them, and maybe find out what was so funny.

"Excuse me, Miss Sophia," Mrs. Bunsey said, tapping her foot.

The girl who was laughing turned around and smiled the broadest, whitest smile I'd ever seen. "Sorry Mrs. Bunsey. Hi M… Mary?"

A ripple of giggles crossed the room. My face went bright red. She looked embarrassed, too.

* * *

My friendship with Donald had come out of nowhere. He sat beside me in class. Everyone immediately knew that I was older. That I was supposed to be in grade eight. That I wasn't a part of their class. But he saw my book. He asked me what I was doing with that big thing.

"I'm going to build a computer," I said, looking away immediately. I wasn't trying to let the conversation even start.

"Oh yeah? My grandpa did that. For the army or something."

I couldn't help myself. I glanced back at him. "What do you know about it?"

His square face creased. "I didn't say I was the one building computers."

My face burned. "Sorry. I didn't mean that. I meant, do you know anything about it?"

"Oh." He looked down at the book. "Not much. But it looks cool."

"Does it?"

He smiled. He had a nice smile, warm and without teeth, and he had a dimple. "Yeah. Is it the first time you've built something like this?"

I shook my head. "I made a couple walkie talkies last year. They work from one end of this place to the other."

"That's pretty far. No way you failed grade seven cause you ain't smart, then."

I closed off immediately. I turned to face the teacher, who was opening the door for some late student or something. Donald cleared his throat and asked to see more from the book, leaning closer to my desk.

I didn't want to ignore that. I opened to one of the pages I had bookmarked. I had a lot of bookmarks. I didn't dog ear pages. "This is what I'm working on right now…"

* * *

That evening, after doing enough of my homework to not feel bad about it, I rode out on my bike to the other side of town where the shops were. I had a folder full of resumes in my bag. I stopped at every store: the gas station, the salon, the drug store, the grocery store, the butcher's, even the vet's to be a receptionist. Nobody was hiring. They didn't even take my resumes.

I walked my bike back up the road, defeated. Most of the houses were several house lengths between, with big yards full of all sorts of things: lawn ornaments, kids toys, lawnmowers, small produce gardens. There were a few close to the shops that were townhouses, stuck together on either side. The closer to the museum, and to my house, I got, the further apart the houses were.

At the end of one driveway, a familiar girl was helping a boy fix his bike. Another bike, presumably hers, was discarded on the lawn. They stopped when I came by.

"Hey," the boy said. "It's Marnie. Or should I say Mary?"

Neither the girl nor I laughed; she looked as embarrassed as I

did. Somehow that was reassuring, but I still felt a little angry.

"My name is Marnie," I said curtly, picking up the pace.

"Wait," the girl said. I heard her scold the boy before running after me.

I did stop, but only after several paces. I turned to look at her, frowning. "What?"

She was looking at me with a shy smile, pushing her coily hair out of her eyes. "I'm sorry. I should have been paying attention to the teacher when she introduced you," she said earnestly. "I told everybody not to call you that, but…"

I shrugged. "It's fine. I get it."

She rubbed the back of her neck, looking up at me with her dark, dark eyes. "Really?"

"Yeah," I said, trying to choose my words carefully. "I guess it comes with being new."

She hummed thoughtfully. "That's true. You'll get used to it here, but only if you have a friend. I'm Sophia," she said, extending her hand quickly. "Nice to meet you, Marnie."

Now I was blushing. I shook her hand. "Nice to meet you too."

* * *

Donald and I stayed near school to do our homework. Dad wouldn't care if I didn't come home until dinner was ready, so I wasn't that worried. Donald was good at math, science, and social studies, and I was good at English where he struggled, so we made a good team. We were both bad at French. But I liked working with him, so it was okay. When we were done as much as he wanted to do, I asked where he lived. Everyone already knew me. Dad was unforgettable

for not letting Kilkenny's bulldoze our house. Now I was too. But Donald didn't seem to mind as much as everyone else. He told me about his family's pig farm. Pigs, unsurprisingly, are Sowridge's major export. Then hay. But mostly pigs. Pryeville had the shops, and the vet, so that's how it stayed afloat, but we had pigs. Almost every family in Sowridge either worked on a hay farm or a pig farm. Aside from Kilkenny's, the library, and the elderly couple who set up all the events in the square and took care of the church.

Donald's family had the most land and most pigs by far, and he loved every single one. He told me for the whole wandering walk home that he kept track of each pig in a series of workbooks he takes from school, sketching each one and writing out their names, birthdays, personalities, food and scratch preferences, and finally the day they're slaughtered or sold.

"Doesn't it make it harder to kill them if you get so close to them?" I asked, kicking a rock off the road in front of us.

"It makes it easier, for me. My family thinks I'm crazy, but I like to make sure they got a good life, and they get remembered for who they were as they lived."

We took the curving road up to the square and then cut across the lawn to the back door of the library. I'd been letting him lead. I didn't want to take him by my house and I liked that he understood that.

We went around the side of the library, where his house was just there, a modest bungalow up against the road, the sounds and stinks of hogs all around it in the long field out back. Awkwardly, we stood on the opposite side of the road from each other, not sure how to say goodbye. We waved and he smiled and I thought again how much I like his smile. Then I

turned and went straight home.

* * *

The boy's name was Max. They were friends because she helped him with his schoolwork when he was too tired from hockey practice, and she knew how to fix a bike. I wasn't sure what was in it for her, then. We went into his house for dinner when his mother came out and saw us talking.

"Are you sure it's okay, ma'am?" I asked, taking my shoes off in the foyer.

"Of course, dear," she said, trying to push things around to clear a space at the table for me while Max watched the stove. "The more the merrier."

Sophia hoisted herself up onto one of the tall chairs, politely folding her arms in her lap. "So what were you doing before you came by?"

I took a seat too, when Max's mother finished clearing it. "I tried to apply for a job, but nobody's hiring."

"Obviously," Max said, leaning in the doorway. "They just get their kids and grandkids to work for them. It's cheaper."

I screwed up my face. "That's unfair."

Max sneered right back. "To who, outsiders like you?"

My face went the color of a tomato.

"You don't need to be rude to her," Sophia said meekly, then explained to me that it was just how things worked here. Most of the residents of Pryeville, and the close neighbor Sowridge, have lived here for generations. They grew up working in their parents' shops, and when they had kids, their kids worked for them. "It's just how it is. A tight knit community."

Max nodded firmly. "No room for outsiders."

* * *

I opened the door and slipped down the hallway to the kitchen, where Dad was stirring a pot of canned soup.

"How was your first day of grade seven?" he asked without looking up.

I put my bag down on the floor beside the chair at the kitchen table. "It was okay."

"Did you learn anything?"

I wanted to tell him that yes, I learned about Donald's farm and how pigs like getting their backs scratched and that they'll eat anything that's edible but some of them have favorite foods, but instead I mumbled a version of a lesson or two from today. Because that's what he wanted to hear.

"But did you really learn anything?" He took the pot off the stove.

I didn't respond. I was hovering beside the table. Unsure if I was going to be asked to leave.

"Are we going to have a repeat of last year, Edgar?"

I didn't know if I was supposed to answer that.

"I asked you a question."

"No."

"Good."

I moved my hand to the back of the chair. He sat first. He put the whole pot in front of him. He slurped from the stirring spoon.

I stared, though I tried not to. He had soup in his mustache. My neck itched.

"What?" he sneered.

"Nothing," I said, "sorry."

* * *

I rode home after dinner. I was used to being out alone, but not in so much open space. There weren't as many landmarks out here, at least not ones that I could recognize, so I always felt like I was getting lost. Following the sun made it easier, but the sun was going down fast, and it was too cloudy to navigate with the moon.

The wind whined. I pedaled harder. Behind me, there was a strange noise, like someone running fast with heavy shoes. I looked over my shoulder, but there was only the long, curvy, empty road. Cold dread fell over me. I pedaled even harder.

When I pulled up to my house, I scrambled off my bike, my heart suddenly racing. I tossed it down and ran up the back porch, all but crashing into my mother's open arms.

"Marnie! We were so worried about you," she exclaimed, squeezing me. "Where were you? What happened?"

"I was just at Max's house," I murmured into her sweater. "A boy in my class. I ran into him and Sophia, they invited me in for dinner…"

"Oh, who are all these characters," she said, holding me at arms length. "My little girl running around with boys. You know how your father will take that." Her face changed. "Go inside, get ready for bed."

She let go of me and I slipped inside without much more than an apology. When I was brushing my teeth, she knocked on the door firmly and told me to say goodnight to my father. When I came to their room to do so, I found he was peacefully sleeping.

* * *

When I turned to go upstairs, he said, "Where're you going?"
I stopped and pivoted back to look at him.
"Sit down. It's dinnertime."
I pulled the chair out. It scraped. I sat.
He put the shallow wooden spoon to his lips again. Slurped.
Made a mess. Made my skin crawl. It was only two more until
I had to itch my neck with my blunt nails.
"Put your hand down," he said firmly.
It snaked down to my lap. I locked my fingers together so it
wouldn't happen again.
I watched him eat dinner. Slowly. Disgustingly. For about half
an hour. Before I was let go upstairs.
I was too sick to work or even to read. I curled into my bed
without brushing my teeth. Fell asleep.
When I woke up, it wasn't quite nighttime. The sun was down
and the moon was up, but it was gray out, like the first clouds
leading in a storm. I sat up, rubbing my mouth with the back
of my hand. I hated the sour taste, it hurt. But I couldn't get up
and brush my teeth. Dad would hear. So my hand had to do.
I carefully turned in bed so nothing creaked but I could look
out the window. I closed my eyes and breathed in the sweet,
cold air. Crickets sang, and the leaves of a few small trees
rustled. Way away, the pastures rolled gently. I could smell the
pigs on the wind and that made me smile. Could I hear them,
too?
No. That's not pigs. Pigs don't howl.
Fear rose up in my chest. I was overcome with feelings so
powerful I nearly slammed my window shut. I slid back into
my bed. Shoved my face into my pillow. Pretended to sleep.

* * *

The next day, Sophia mentioned to me after class that there's an elderly woman whose family all moved away, so she has nobody to help her with household chores. She pressed a folded piece of paper into my palm.

"That's her address," she said, smiling brightly. "She is a little hard of hearing, though. You'll have to knock very loud."

I felt nervousness swell in my stomach. "Could you come with me?"

"Um, no, sorry. I have to hang out with my club…"

"Oh, okay. It's alright." I smiled, trying to swallow my awkwardness. "What club?"

Her eyes flashed and she hugged her books to her chest. "It's a private club."

"Okay, sorry," I mumbled as she hurried away. I puffed out my cheeks and tried to keep my cool as I read the address over and over again, feeling her hands still pressed against mine.

* * *

"Hey Edgar, are you still working at Kilkenny's?"

"Yeah, why?"

"That's too bad. I was telling my family about you and they said they could always use another pair of hands on the farm."

I put down my sandwich and rolled up my sleeve to show my skinny, pale arm. "With what muscles?"

He flexed one big arm, as thick around as some trees, smiling. "We'll toughen you up."

"You're so strong," I said without thinking.

He laughed. It was as good as his smile. "What'd you expect? I can lift a half grown pig."

"Are you aiming for a full grown one?"

"That's right," he said easily. Everything about him was that, so easy. The way his big, worn shirt fell on his big, warm body. The sweep of his short blond hair. I knew I had to stop looking at him, but I couldn't look anywhere else.

Then I said, to try to not make it weird, "You could probably pick me up."

His face creased, went hard. He got up off the short stone wall. He mumbled something, weirdly, "Maybe, but no," and picked up his bags and went off towards school. "Class's 'bout to start."

I was used to doing something wrong. But this was different.

* * *

When I got up to the big, old house, I carefully set my bike down in the driveway and walked up to the imposing front door. Each stair on the steps up to the porch creaked, and I swore the ivy tendrils were curling ever closer to me as I approached. I leaned and picked at a leaf, watching a ladybug fly off and into the garden below. When I finally got the courage to stand next to the door, I picked up the heavy iron knocker.

Boom, boom, boom.

I listened carefully, but couldn't hear anything inside. I waited a few minutes, wondering how deep the house went, how long it took to cross it from wherever the woman was. I twiddled my thumbs. I tapped my feet. I let out a great big sigh.

I raised my hand to grab the knocker again as the giant door opened just a crack.

My hand shot back down. "Hi! I'm Marnie O'Connor. My friend said you need help with some chores so I thought I would stop by and ask if I could help you, I'd only want a couple dollars a day."

She blinked, sipping her tea with a shaky hand. She brushed her fine, white hair out of her face, introduced herself as Mrs. Kane, and asked if I could repeat myself a little slower.

* * *

I spent all day stacking boxes. Unloading other boxes. Putting some boxes away. Opening the right boxes and putting their contents on the shelves.

Boxes. All day.

It was better than people. I didn't like tools. I don't know tools. I know how to lift boxes, put boxes in safe places, open and unpack boxes. I guess that's why they put me back here, in the little, cramped, pot smoke stinking room.

The other employees come smoke pot back here because there's a camera out behind the building. I don't understand why they're so worried. A cigarette looks the same as a pot cigarette. I think, anyway. It's not like they ever offer me any. Not that I'd want it.

In here, the smell gets stuck, too.

The door opened as I was coming down the ladder from putting a box way high up. I stopped, decided I didn't want to talk to anyone, and climbed back up. I could pretend I was doing something as long as nobody was able to see me. Plus, I could see them pretty well from up on the ladder.

It was Henry. I knew Henry liked to smoke in here. That's what he was doing now, I could see. I peered a little closer, and saw he had something else in his hand. Other than the lighter.

It looked like a dryer sheet, and he was smoking through it. Weird. Was that for the smell? But I could smell it so strongly anyway.

Maybe he just wasn't that smart, because of all the pot smoking.

* * *

I worked for her for two weeks, every day, for one hour a day. I cleaned her bathroom, I vacuumed her living room, I helped her cook dinner, I cleaned out her freezer, I trimmed her hedges, and I hung a birdhouse in the tree in her yard. Then, after I finished dusting her bookshelf on Sunday evening, she gave me a little envelope with my name written on it in beautiful cursive. Inside was seventy dollars. Seventy dollars!

I thanked her and gave her a businesslike handshake before skipping down the steps to grab my bike. My head was full of all the things I'd do: I'd ask Sophia if she wanted to get ice cream tomorrow after school, then I'd try a slice of cheesecake while we're at the diner. I could get some more birdseed too; I'm pretty sure Mom ran out because she hadn't been putting any down for the past couple days. The rest of the money would go into savings for when I go to university. If I kept up like this, I'm sure it would add up fast!

I rode all the way back home in an ecstatic glow, so happy I barely noticed that the sun had gone down a lot faster tonight. So happy I barely noticed the strange sound following me again.

I ran up the steps of the back porch, having to kick a few wet leaves away, worried Dad would slip on them if he came outside. I was overjoyed to tell my mother that I'd gotten seventy dollars. She smiled tersely and asked to see, so I handed her the envelope. She opened it, leafed through the contents, and tucked it away in her apron pocket with a nod.

"Thank you, Marnie, my love. This helps a lot."

I was stunned. I watched her hands as she walked away to the living room. I had to force myself to follow her. Hovering in the doorway, I watched her tidy up the cups from the coffee table and turn off the television. My father wasn't in his chair; he was probably asleep already, like he usually was by the time I got home from working with Mrs. Kane.

When she was finished, my mother looked up and smiled at me. She kissed me on the cheek and said goodnight before leaving me to go to bed. All the fight went out of me, and I felt like I might cry.

* * *

Envelope of money in hand, I walked out across the parking lot. I didn't want to go home. I just got off a late shift. Dinner would be ready. But would it really be?

I wondered if I should put some money in my bank and get dinner with the rest, but all that was in Pryeville. I was walking straight to the library. I had been wanting to use my next pay to try to make up with Donald. I wondered if I'd get a chance.

I walked along the edge of the parking lot, where the grass grew sparsely. Picking up the pace in case Dad looked out the window, I crossed the nearest loop of the road. This brought me between two properties. I turned right, going up towards the highway. A hay field stood quietly beside me in the fading light. The smell was slightly musty and damp from the rain we'd gotten last night. As I passed the furthest house on the road, the ground sloped upward slowly. The hay field petered out so it was just scrappy scrubs and junk next to the highway. A few cars sped by, and a transport truck. I stayed away from the crest of the hill. Even a few dozen feet away, the smell of

gasoline and asphalt was too much for me.
It didn't take me long to turn around and start heading home. But as I got up to the library, looking out across the square and past the church to my house, I was depressed. I leaned on the library's wall for a moment, kicking a rock. I pulled my envelope out of my pocket and unfolded it. If not Donald, and if not dinner, I guess this would go towards getting out of here.
I had a bit of money in the bank. Most of that gets taken by Dad if he wants it. But under a loose floorboard under my bed, there's a couple hundred dollars. Someday, I'll use that to get out of here.
I don't know how I'll do it, but I will.
I sighed. I wasn't going home yet. I started walking straight ahead, up to the road. Then I turned left and took it down the gentle curve. The smell of pigs and manure was strong in the air. My eyes were on the ground the whole time. I was listening instead of looking. And I thought I heard something crunching along behind me, over the pebbles in the road. I turned, but there was nothing there.
When I looked ahead of me, I was standing in front of Donald's house.
My heart dropped. I instantly turned around and walked across the road. The small graveyard was in my path. With the sun nearly all the way down, I felt weird walking beside it. I wasn't normally that scared of the graveyard. What can the dead do? But this time was different. I distinctly felt like I was being watched and followed. There was something walking behind me, stopping when I stopped, invisible when I looked. I ran the whole way home, slowing only to come inside too quiet to wake Dad.
When I got upstairs, I looked out the window of the bathroom.

There was nothing outside in the candlelight from the church.

* * *

Laying in bed that night, I couldn't get myself to sleep. I tossed and turned, I covered myself with blankets, I kicked them all off. I even put my pillow on the other end of the bed. Nothing was working.

Eventually I gave up and sat with my legs hanging over the edge of my bed. I stretched and yawned, fluffing out my ginger hair. Then I crossed the room to open my curtains.

From here, I could see how beautiful the world was at night. The open land between our house and our neighbor's house was just a smudge of dark green. The road was a black line, snaking along through the grass. The trees were massive, whispering guardians. The sky was swimming with glitter. And there, beyond the houses across the road, in the light of the 24 hour vet's office, there was a bright white figure, brighter than light. A horse, walking slow, head down. Tired. Alone.

Like me.

I shook myself. I don't know where that thought came from. In the far parking lot, the horse lifted its head and stared right at me. I shut my curtain hurriedly and clambered back into bed, my heart hammering like it had that day I heard the thunderous footsteps behind me.

No, not footsteps. Hoof beats!

It had to be.

I pulled the blankets further over my head and tried to lull myself to sleep, but in each gust of wind, I heard the horse whinny. Like it was calling me out. Like it wanted a friend.

* * *

Trying to sleep that night was impossible. My mind was racing. I didn't know how to deal with the feelings I had for Donald. I couldn't even put a name to them. Maybe I just didn't have enough friends. Maybe I'd never been liked by someone like that before. It was just friendship. And I wasn't good at it. I could try again with someone else, maybe. But everyone else knows I'm too stupid to pass grade seven. Let alone be someone's friend.

If I could just be normal…

Angry, I sat up and tossed my blankets off of me. There's nothing here for me. No Donald, no friends, only Dad and his anger and no food. I stepped off the bed, lightly. Picked up my jacket from my chair and put it on. Looked at my box of computer parts, and the book open on my desk. My head hurt. I turned away and opened the window. It didn't matter. It couldn't matter.

I had to get the money. I had to get away.

But there was something in the grass outside. It was dark, with the church lights burnt out and Kilkenny's closed. The streetlight closest to us barely worked, flickering on and off. I looked out my window. The world smelled thick and wet. I crawled back onto my bed to get a better look. Once I saw it, I didn't need the finicky light. It was a dog, black as midnight, but I could see it perfectly. It sniffed the ground, then looked up at me.

It was so sad. It looked right into me. I was so sad too. I couldn't look away.

At some point, I did fall asleep. I only knew because I woke up on my floor in the morning, with my jacket on. My money was

still safely hidden. I looked outside for the dog. There was no sign of it.

* * *

In class on Monday, I told Sophia I'd seen something weird.

"What do you mean?"

"Well… It was like a horse, but it was all white and shimmery," I said. "It was the middle of the night and it was out in front of the vet's, but it glowed more than that, I swear. And what's really weird is it looked right at me from my window!"

With each word, she got more closed off. Her smile faded to a tight frown.

"What? What's wrong?" I asked.

She turned away sharply, focusing her full attention on her worksheet. She didn't even give me an answer. I just sat there, dumb, and tried to go back to work. The letters only switched places and blurred on the page. When the bell rang, I realized I'd fallen asleep and drooled all over my work.

"Ugh," I sighed, wiping my hand on my pants and trying to tidy up as best I could. I heard laughter from behind me. I didn't dare look, but I knew it was Sophia.

* * *

When I saw Donald walk into class on Monday, I knew I had to tell him about the dog. I tried not to stare at him as he came and sat down. Getting through the lesson was torture. But as soon as I could talk to him, I did, and he opened up. We spoke in bits and pieces throughout the day.

"What kind of dog was it?"

"A shepherd, maybe a collie mix. It was so clear."

"When did you see it?"

"I don't know, maybe half past midnight."

"Was it a full grown dog?"

"Yeah."

"Did it have a collar or anything?"

"No."

"You said it was black?"

"Completely, but I could see it clearly at the same time. I felt like I could reach out and touch it."

The bell rang, finally. He looked thoughtful, and a little sly. He leaned over to say something, but I was distracted. Someone behind me made a disgusted sound. I turned to see the new girl wiping drool on her pants. It was all over her face, the desk and the worksheets. It reeked like her breakfast and sleep. I felt sick to my stomach. I retched. I itched my face and chest. I couldn't control myself. My eyes were screwed up. When I saw Donald, he looked just as disgusted as I was. But he was looking right at me.

I felt like I was on fire. I struggled up. I grabbed my stuff with twitching hands. And I left without looking back.

* * *

After that day, she wouldn't be my friend. She didn't do group work with me, she didn't say hi to me, she didn't even look at me. I'd never had my heart broken, but I'm sure this is what it felt like.

I spent all my spare time helping Mrs. Kane or my mother. After another two weeks, my mother asked me for the money, so I couldn't even hide it away. I didn't see the point in arguing.

What would I really do with it anyway, without Sophia to get ice cream and cheesecake with?

Every night coming home, I would hear those hoof beats following me. I still raced away, but it wasn't out of fear anymore. If I ever caught sight of that horse, I'd throw something at it so it kept far away from me.

* * *

After that day, I couldn't let him talk to me. We didn't do homework together. We didn't say good morning to each other. I tried hard to act like he wasn't even there. I was used to this. Being treated like a freak. But this hurt for real. I started picking up more shifts. On my next payday, I hid all of my money under my bed. Dad was furious when he went to withdraw from my account and there wasn't enough. It didn't matter. I had to get out of here.

But every night, I heard that dog howling again. It was so loud sometimes I thought it would wake Dad. But it never did. It was only howling for me.

* * *

As September became October, the leaves changed to brilliant reds and browns, gourds grew in the gardens of my neighbors, and the first real chills of winter rode in on the wind. A nurse had been coming all the way from Ottawa, so I was working more. Mrs. Kane baked me a little pumpkin pie, with my help, and she even paid me for the time it took.

On my ride home, I brainstormed a way to give her a gift back. I couldn't keep any of my money, so I couldn't buy her

something. I guess I could make a little fall bouquet for her, but that felt too… I don't know.

I sighed heavily, turning up the road that put the sun on my shoulder. Seeing my big house in the distance, I realized I'd probably have to give up the pie, too.

I braked hard. My stomach felt like a burning ball. I was so angry that my whole body was warm; I soon had to unzip my overcoat so I didn't overheat. I felt like a furnace, hot, red, churning, generating power for something I didn't want to be a part of!

I got off my bike. I put my bag on the ground. I took the pie in its box out of the basket on the bike and put it into my bag. I put my bag back on. Then I pedaled home.

My mother greeted me in the kitchen. She held her hand out and I put the envelope in it, not looking at her. I shook out my hair, trying to shake off energy.

"I'm gonna go to the library," I said, backing up to the door.

"Oh, what for? Don't you want to relax?"

"That's what I'll be doing," I said, maybe a little too harshly.

She looked sad, but told me to enjoy myself and be back before bedtime.

Feeling guilty, I gave her a hug goodbye before heading out.

* * *

"May I go for a walk?"

Dad narrowed his eyes. "Empty your pockets."

I turned them inside out. "I have no money."

He waved his hand, dismissing me.

I picked up my keys. Struggled to open the door. Then I stumbled outside. It was cold. I was dressed for it. But I was

still freezing.

It took me a long time to walk in a straight line. My head spun. My torso ached from the belly up. I was so hungry my heart felt cold. Every time I blinked, the world got further away. I soon wasn't sure where I was. But instead of panicking, I felt something beside me. Guiding me.

I tripped suddenly and landed with a thud against a door. Footsteps, then: "Edgar? My goodness, what's happened to you? Come inside," and warm hands pulling me up.

I found myself at the kitchen table of Mrs. McWillie. Donald's mom. I was in Donald's house. It smelled warm and cozy. A big bowl of soup and a slice of fresh bread was set in front of me. It was steaming. It smelled so good. I looked up at her. "Go on, eat," she encouraged me. Her face was so concerned. I didn't need to be told twice.

She sat beside me. "You haven't eaten all day, have you?" There was something in her voice. She sounded so wounded.

I ate so fast I nearly threw up. She patted my back. Something about that made me start crying. That made me feel worse. I rubbed my cheeks with the back of my hand.

"Oh, sweetheart," she said, turning my face up towards her. She didn't even have to ask what's wrong. Everybody knows everybody's business.

We sat for a while. She let me cry. I kept waiting for her to get fed up, but she never did.

When I was ready, I said, "Sorry."

"You have nothing to be sorry for, hun." Her face softened. She had a big face like Donald's, but it was rounder. She looked a lot like him. Or him like her. Same blue eyes, same big bodies, same red blonde hair. Though hers was curly. "You're friends with my Donald at school, aren't you?"

I nodded, swallowing.

"You're always welcome in my home, then. He talks about you, you know," she said, rising to take my dishes to the sink.

"Does he?"

"Oh, yes." She turned on the tap. "He's quite fond of you, I think. There isn't a day that goes by that he's not got some story about you."

I didn't understand, we hadn't spoken for weeks. "Like what?"

"Oh, how you know everything there is to know about computers. We haven't got one, of course, so he's got these fanciful ideas. He's so impressed that you're making your own. And those walkie talkies you made! I think that's incredible myself."

I didn't know what to say.

She looked back at me after a moment. "Is there something the matter?"

"It's just that we haven't spoken for a while. I didn't think he wanted anything to do with me."

"Really…"

I nodded. "I miss him. Not a lot of people give me a chance. I like him," I swallowed dryly, "a lot. He's really kind. He told me about the pigs, how he takes care of them. I know he's got a big heart."

Donald cleared his throat. I nearly jumped out of my skin. He was standing right there in the doorway, arms crossed, looking down at me. With one of those easy smiles.

His mom dried her hands on a small towel and said, smiling just the same, "I'll leave you two be." She bustled out of the room.

"Hey, Edgar."

"Hey, Donald."

I didn't know what to do with myself.
"D'you want to see the pigs?"
Relief washed over me. "Sure."
We walked outside through the back door, on the other side of the living room. There was a lot of land here, with them owning the whole loop of the road up to their house and then some. Almost all of it was land for the pigs. To the side of the house was a small vegetable garden, then a huge barn. The rest was fenced in for the pigs to roam. He hopped the fence easily but I couldn't manage it. The air was thick with pig smell. We walked a bit til the door. Then he opened it for me. I made sure the latch was on right while he scanned the herd. Then he whistled. I didn't know pigs would come to a whistle, but this one did. She was a full grown pink sow, oinking and grunting as she trotted up. He introduced her as Dotty II. She liked when I scratched her back. We saw a couple more pigs. Biggs and Rufus.
I had to scratch my neck. I couldn't do it anymore. The smell…
"Do you want to go inside and look at my books instead?"
I nodded. Maybe too happily. I was just so relieved he didn't think I was a freak.

* * *

On my way out, my dad's nurse was walking up the walkway. She smiled and waved at me but I just dove past her to grab my bike. I pedaled and pedaled. I didn't want to think about what that meant. I just couldn't deal with it all right at the same time.
With the wind freezing my face and tugging at my messy curls, I let the thoughts leave my mind. I raced a gust of wind that stirred up fallen leaves, I startled a fat squirrel out of a

neighbor's garden. Hitting the curve in the road faster than I'd ever done, I sped past the two houses and the bar. I swerved around a discarded can before looping back to pick it up. I hated litter. There's no point to it, it's just lazy and bad for the environment.

As I passed the museum, I saw Sophia walking up to it. Do the locals really go see the exhibits at a museum about their own town? I wouldn't do that for Ottawa.

She turned and saw me staring. "Can I help you?" she said, clearly unhappy.

My face went bright red as I came to a stop. "Do you want some pumpkin pie?" I blurted. I had no idea where that came from, but she smiled, so I went with it.

"Sure," she said, still a bit uneasy, but I was making progress!

"I was heading to the library if you want to come."

"Sure."

I got off my bike and walked it beside her to the library. I asked her if she was going to check out the museum.

"I was going home," she said. "I live there, above the museum part."

My thoughts clicked together like puzzle pieces. Sophia was the only Black student I'd seen; I assumed I just hadn't seen any others yet. But I'd been around town enough to know that the only other Black person here was the woman who owned the museum, who I'd only briefly met on that tour we took when we first moved. God, that must be hard for her. I didn't know how to approach that, so I was silent until we got to the library. We sat on the benches outside and I passed her a piece of pie on a little paper plate.

We ate quietly for a bit, then she started talking.

"My step dad is a jerk," she said. "He got my mother to

straighten her hair and he keeps pressuring me to do the same. She used to have this great big afro and we had a game where I would put my pencil crayons and paint brushes in it til they all fell out. We'd bet on how many it would be, or if a pencil or a paintbrush would be last, and whoever won got to choose dinner when we ordered out." She paused and smiled with a fond sigh. "She always said to me that I should feel good about my hair, even though it was looser curls than hers, because it makes me strong and it makes me me," she said as she bounced her silky, shiny ringlets.

"Your hair is beautiful," I agreed, then shoved a forkful of pie into my mouth, embarrassed at how forward that was.

But she said, "Thank you," and looked proud.

"Your step dad sounds like he sucks," I said, very aware of how forced and awkward I sounded.

She nodded. "And that's not all. He doesn't like when we play jazz or R&B or disco tracks. We don't get to dance no more. We'd dance and clean and cook and it made life easier," she put her paper plate down on the bench, "because things were hard before he came, just a better kind of hard."

"I know what you mean," I said.

She glanced at me, her eyes flashing. "You've got both parents, Marnie, you don't know what I mean."

I cringed. That was like being stabbed. I couldn't get the words together fast enough to tell her how she doesn't know what she's talking about, but she sagged before I could get mad at her.

"I'm sorry. I'm… It's hard."

I didn't say anything for a few minutes. I wanted to forgive her, I really did. I liked her so much. But that was hurtful. I couldn't bring myself to tell her that, though, so I just suggested

we go down to the computer room and dance to whatever she wanted. That made her happy, and I tried not to resent how good that made me feel.

* * *

After we looked through his recent albums, Donald and I went to the library. He was interested in watching me research some things about the computer I'm trying to build. He apologized for not being much help, but I told him I liked him around anyway. This time, he didn't think that was weird.

"I thought you said your book was the library's best, though," he said as we walked in the front doors.

"It is. But they've got a computer room here, so I can use the internet."

Donald made an impressed noise. "Will your computer have the internet?"

"That's what I'm trying to see how to do."

We walked down the stairs to the basement, where the computers were. Even though it was colder downstairs, the computer room was hot. There were only three computers, but they were powerful. I looked at the domed glass monitor. The back was big and beige. I picked it up to see how heavy it was.

"What are you doing?" Donald asked. He sounded a little surprised.

"I don't have one of these yet. I haven't felt one. It's heavy."

"If you lift enough of those, you'll be fit to work on the farm in no time."

I laughed. "Maybe!"

"Let me feel."

I put it down and started to roll up a sleeve. But he bent and

lifted the monitor.

"No problem," he bragged. Then he put it down like he was scared to break it.

I laughed. Maybe a bit too much.

Then the doors opened. In walked Sophia. The new girl was right behind her.

* * *

"Oh, uh, we don't have to be here right now," Sophia said, turning to try to squeeze past me.

"It's okay," the bigger boy said. "We only need one computer. Right, Edgar?"

"Yes."

Sophia glanced at me, her eyes clearly asking me to save her from this embarrassing mess. That made me feel something I didn't have a name for yet.

"It's okay," I said carefully, wanting to hold onto that feeling. "I've got something to research on the computer too."

"Can't we use a book?"

I shrugged, trying not to be too sad I'd disappointed her. "I used to have the internet at home. It's easier. Plus, it'll be a lot faster."

She set her mouth in a small line. "Okay."

We chose the computer furthest from the boys, just for privacy I guess. I logged in and waited for the computer to connect to the internet. Then I went right to searching for anything about ghost horses.

Sophia leaned over. "What are you looking at?"

"Remember the horse I was telling you about? I'm sure it's a ghost," I said. It's true that I resented it for making Sophia angry

with me, but I couldn't get it out of my head. I had to know if there was something, anything, that someone else knew about it.

Sophia, again, looked upset. She huffed and sat back in her chair.

"What's wrong?" I asked. I kind of knew the answer, though.

"You shouldn't have seen the horse," she blurted, eyebrows knitted in anger. "It's not fair. You haven't been here forever like we have. It's not your history to steal!" She burst up from her chair, knocking it into the table behind us, then stormed out the door.

* * *

I could see how much Sophia's rejection hurt the new girl. She trembled all over, just a bit. I knew what that felt like.

"Hey," I called, "um, sorry. I don't know your name."

She turned and smiled. It was a weak smile. "Marnie."

"Nice to meet you. I'm Edgar, and this is Donald."

Now she knows she's got friends. I turned back to the computer and finished reading the web page I'd found. Then I realized she'd spoken about a ghost horse.

Could that have something to do with the ghost dog I keep seeing? I awkwardly asked if she'd tell me about the horse. She opened up right away. She told me how she'd been seeing it at night, and hearing it follow her home from work at Mrs. Kane's house. She'd never seen anything like it. So I told her about the ghost dog. Donald was really interested in that.

"Let's look it up on the internet!" Marnie suggested. "We can both look, so it'll go faster."

"Sure," I said. I wasn't sure I could help much. I ended up

discouraged. I looked tiredly at computer web pages. Soon, she called me over to her computer. She told me that sometimes, settlers would bury a dog first in a new cemetery. That way, the spirit stays and protects the town, and it was called a church grim, or sometimes a barghest.

"They didn't want a human spirit needing to stay behind, since they believe that's what happened to the first person buried there," she said. "So they'd kill a black dog. I guess it helped that they're loyal, loving animals."

Donald said, "I think I remember something about a dog collar being found in the cemetery. The old one, from before this place was two towns."

"Really?"

He nodded. "We can go look at the museum with you, if you want."

* * *

"No!" I said, then winced, not meaning to be so loud about it. "I need to make things right first, between me and Sophia." Then I added, "She lives at the museum," which I probably didn't have to, because they live here and know her.

"Yeah, I guess that would be awkward," Donald agreed.

I nodded. "I'll set things right."

For the next two weeks, I worked extra hard at Mrs. Kane's, not for more money, but for a reason to be out of the house as long as possible and dog tired when I got home. The nurse had been coming over more and more, and I hated it. I didn't want her to be there. We'd already moved, we changed everything. Dad should be better by now.

The day I got paid, I didn't go home. I biked to Sophia's house.

Luckily, her mom was in the museum dusting, so I just had to ask her if I could see Sophia and she went upstairs to get her for me.

She looked surprised, and a little mad. She acted nice in front of her mom and when we went outside, she asked me why I'd do this.

"I want to get ice cream with you," I said, trying hard to be brave. "I wanna make things right."

Sophia paused, studying my face. I couldn't help thinking how pretty her dark eyes were.

"It's okay if—" I started, but she put her hand on my upper arm, briefly.

"No, I do. I wanna go with you."

My heart didn't stop racing for the whole walk. It was, lucky for me, a short walk; the diner was on the same road as school, but closer to the museum.

It was a cute diner: the floor was checkered black and white, the trim on the bar was shiny chrome with a red strip, and the counter tops were white speckled with black and red. There were fun decorations everywhere, like big novelty clocks and pop art paintings of milkshakes and eggs. We got strawberry ice cream cones with chunks of real strawberries in them, and sat on the plush red stools. Our legs were too short to reach the footrest, so we swung our feet to the music over the radio.

It was strange to be here with her, like we were friends, like she wasn't mad at me. I was going to bring it up, but she did.

"I'm sorry for how I've been mean to you."

I started to say it's fine, but I stopped. It wasn't fine. I can let myself feel that.

"My step dad isn't from here, either," she began, "and I really hate him. He's not… He's not a good person. I didn't think

you'd automatically be just as bad as him, not being from here, but I guess I was taking it out on you because you're new." She sighed and lowered her other hand a little. "Max was mean to you because of this, too, I think. He's always looking for my approval. I should have told him he was wrong."

I frowned. I remembered when my dad first got sick, I got really mean to my friends at school. I even started picking on this one girl who always got picked up by her dad. He couldn't pick me up anymore, and I had to walk myself home. It kind of felt like she was stealing that from me, even though I knew she wasn't doing anything at all. So I reached out for Sophia's hand and told her that I forgive her, even though it hurts.

"Thank you," she said with a shy smile, holding my hand. "I want us to be friends."

"I want us to be friends, too," I said, breathlessness slowly eating up the hurt in my belly. I pulled my hand away with a little laugh, then, for some reason, asked her if she'd gotten ice cream with anyone else like this.

Sophia pursed her lips and looked away. "Max and I aren't dating, if that's what you're asking."

I laughed louder than I meant to, and she laughed too.

"Boys aren't all our moms make them out to be, huh?" Sophia said.

I nodded vigorously.

"Max is such a weirdo. He's always had a crush on me. He used to follow me around at recess and do stuff for me. Now I do his homework because his mom likes me, and I fix his bike because it's an easy few bucks. But I don't really like him. Not even as a friend."

I nodded. "There was a boy at my old school like that. I mean, at my elementary school in Ottawa. Nobody had a crush on me

at my old middle school."

"Do you want someone to have a crush on you?"

My mouth got dry and my tongue suddenly couldn't move. I struggled to say, "Maybe."

She looked at me for a few seconds too long, then we both went back to our ice creams. We talked for a bit about school, and friends, and how it was in Ottawa, but we never talked about boys or crushes again. We were about to leave when I realized I'd almost forgotten to ask her about the horse.

"Oh, yeah," she said, rubbing the back of her neck and looking away. "I guess it's kind of dumb, but me and my friends have had this club since we were little where we try to find the horse. I learned about it from my mom, of course. I thought it was so cool so my friends wanted to make a secret club about it. We've never actually seen it, though. I was amazed that you had, even though I didn't wanna believe it. I was so jealous, and with everything else, it was just more to take out on you." She looked really sad. "I'm sorry, Marnie. I'm a lousy friend."

"You're not lousy," I said. I didn't know how to tell her what I was feeling, so I just walked with her for a bit and hoped she knew she was still my friend, and she wasn't bad. "People do things they don't mean when things are hard."

She nodded slowly and sighed.

"What did you say you learned from your mom?" I asked. "About the horse?"

"Oh, years ago, when the town was first settled, before it was Sowridge and Pryeville, a horse and dog were buried on the ground they built on. That's what my mom thinks, at least. The only evidence is a dog collar and horse's halter found in the cemetery, not close to any bodies. That, and the old Danish story of the helhest."

"The helhest?"

"Yeah. It's an undead horse, a ghost or a demon or something, that's said to bring death and illness."

My eyes widened and my heart felt like it might stop.

"Don't worry," she said, seeming to realize what she'd said. "You never said it was three legged, right?"

I shook my head, not sure what she was getting at.

"Then it's not a helhest. So no death."

I let out a breath I didn't know I was holding. "So why'd you bring it up in the first place?"

"Because a helhest happens when a horse comes back from the dead, specifically the horses that are the first buried in a new graveyard. So maybe it is a helhest, just not the bad kind."

That's just like the barghest. I told her about them.

She got a determined look in her eye. "How about we go looking for this horse together sometime? My friends would be jealous, too, so we can go on our own."

"Yeah. I'd like that."

* * *

I left as soon as my pay was in my hand. I was so hungry. I'd nearly fallen off the ladder today. I needed to get food. I hadn't eaten since yesterday morning, and it was just past dinnertime now. I was hoping to go to the diner. I passed my front door. And Dad stepped out.

"Hand it over, Edgar."

My throat got tight. I handed him the envelope. My hand was shaking. He put it in the pocket of his heavy jacket. He sighed. And told me to get inside. I crept along behind him. I was sent to my room. I didn't know what to do. Everything

felt so hard. My head was pounding. My heart hurt. I tried to sleep. But my hunger kept me awake. I tried to think about Donald. Maybe that would take my mind off it. He invited me to sleep over. I'd like that. But it would never work. Not with Dad. But I could dream…

Giving up, I opened the window. I wanted to be comfortable, at least.

There it was. Staring right through me. The black dog.

"Do you want me to follow you?" I breathed. Up and down, I was filled with longing.

It perked its ears and woofed softly. I could see that it longed for someone, too.

I slid out of bed. I found a warm sweater on the ground and put it on. Pants too. Then I crept out of my room. The hallway was easy. The stairs creaked, but not when I stepped like this. And this. And this. The front door was in sight. I moved like a ghost and before I could understand what I did, I was outside. I was free.

I looked over my shoulder. If only I had my computer parts and my money, then I'd really be able to do anything I wanted. When I looked back in front of me, to where the dog had stood, I found I was all alone.

Standing on the pathetic strip of grass between my house and my workplace, I was consumed with anger. I just started walking. I didn't care where I went, as long as it wasn't back inside that house.

It had no right being there. The only reason it still was wasn't fair. Dad had sold everything of Mom's. He'd taken all her life insurance money. All for lawyers. The best lawyers money could buy. Just to make sure he kept his shitty little house. But of course that wasn't all. The house was a symbol. He was

so damn proud of that. The house wasn't just a house. It represented his victory. Him being faced with the iron fist of the government and winning. How he stuck it to the man. Dad always raved about how the government oppressed him. How society didn't care about him. It was worse after Mom died. He was a single father, he said. Nobody gave a shit about single fathers.

But when I gag myself sick because it's too wet. When I scratch my neck til I bleed because something smells too strong. When I get beaten up for calling another boy cute…

I clenched my fists. Unclenched them.

Somehow that isn't as bad as how he's got it.

I tried my whole life to make him happy. To act like this was right. Like he was right. Act like Dad wanted. But it's never enough. Never enough to let me eat…

I wobbled. The ground had changed beneath my feet. I was on black pavement. The wind blew hard, whipping up dirt and leaves. It smelled pungent. How'd I get on the highway? And so far from home.

I looked around. There were no cars coming in either direction. To one side, there were soybean fields. To the other, scrappy woodland. I was definitely far from Sowridge. I probably wasn't too far. I hadn't noticed the lights of Pryeville. I could probably turn around and walk home easily. But I was rooted to the spot. Even as my feet hurt and bled. I didn't know why. I stood for many minutes, eyes closed. The world around me was just sounds and smells: crickets, wind, a coyote far away, the leaves of the trees, small animals in the undergrowth. Crisp air, frost, earth, car exhaust, pavement. Nighttime. When my eyes opened, it was standing before me. The ghost dog. Come to lead me home.

My heart jumped. I started shivering. All at once, I was afraid. I was lost. I didn't want to go home.

The dog woofed softly. Turned. And started padding down the road.

I followed without looking back. We walked for a long time. If the dog was leading me back to Dad, I didn't know what I'd do. I trusted this dog. Something unbreakable inside me told me it was okay. But this fantasy had stopped the moment I crossed the threshold.

Eventually, we passed the hay fields I knew. My heart began to race. My head should have been spinning. I still hadn't eaten anything. I was terrified of Dad. But I felt, physically, calm. We passed the last stretch of field that met the highway. The dog turned sharply down. We came to the road two over from mine. The scent of pigs and manure was invigorating. Donald's house was a silhouette getting bigger.

The dog vanished before we got to the doorstep. I knocked before I collapsed.

Donald answered the door moments later. He was bleary with sleep. He helped me inside. He didn't ask questions. He just let me sleep on the sofa.

I woke up just before dawn. The house was only starting to wake up. I slipped silently past Mr. McWillie making coffee. He seemed confused, but not upset. I left after giving him a polite nod.

The grass was dewy under my feet. The cuts stung, but the water was nice. The air was sweet and damp. I moved swiftly and quietly. Past the library. Past the graveyard. Past the church. Up to my house.

I knew I'd wake Dad up if I went through the front door. I'd never fool him by going to school like this. I'd never go

without my shoes.

I kept close to the wall, away from the windows. There was a tree that didn't quite line up with my bedroom window. It was close enough. It had to be. I wiped the bottoms of my feet and started climbing. I didn't pay attention to the pain. Or the building itchiness. I just climbed. Keeping away from the windows. Keeping close to the wall.

Finally I was high enough. I tried to reach. The windowsill was just beyond my fingertips. I shifted to the other side. Closer, but not enough. The branch was too thin for me to stand on. But I had no choice. The sun was rising. He'd be up any moment.

I crept out. Reaching with every step. The branch dipped and creaked. I couldn't stop. I'd fall if I stopped. I had to move. Now.

I didn't know how I did it, but I jumped. My hands met the windowsill. I dragged my body through onto my bed. Behind me, the branch snapped and fell to the ground.

I couldn't believe how lucky I was.

* * *

Even though things with me and Sophia were okay again, it wasn't so good at home. My mom's been looking sick, and acting weirder, waking up super early to do chores that wake me up too. When I asked her to stop because I have school and I'm getting too tired to focus, she just gets mad. She never gets mad at me.

My dad, too, hasn't been out of his room in days. Dinner's still made for the three of us, but I've been finding the compost bin more and more full.

One morning, I came downstairs late after sleeping past my alarm. Mom hadn't been waking me up lately because she'd leave for work so early. I was meandering into the kitchen, hoping there were still some frozen waffles left, when I stopped in my tracks. Dad was standing at the kitchen table, clutching a pillow, his face gaunt and white. Mom was on the other side of the table, reaching out to him with shaking arms, panic all over her.

"They're coming for her, Jan. You know it too, don't you? You've gotta be able to see them. The glow in the night," Dad was raving. "There's nothing we can do to keep them out."

I'd never know what compelled me, but I asked, "Who?"

He turned to me and his eyes lit up. "The ghosts, Marnie. They've come for you."

The sound that came out of Mom was one I never heard before and desperately prayed I'd never hear again. She sank to her knees so fast I thought she'd vanished, but I heard her struggling to breathe and speak around the sobs that shook her so hard. I felt something break in me, to be unmoved by some unknown terror that had hurt my mom like this. I crossed the room, feeling like a ghost myself, as Dad shook his head listlessly.

"I don't know what's going on," I managed to say, but my voice was coming from somewhere else.

Mom's voice rose above the sobbing, even though it felt like two tracks playing at the same time, in and out of each other. "He doesn't know what's going on, Marnie. Don't worry."

"I know who I am," Dad said, all the reverence sapped from his voice and face. "I know who you are. You're my daughter. That's what's important."

Mom was, somehow, back on her feet. The only evidence

of her breakdown was the redness and wetness of her face. "Marnie, go to school. Now."

I froze. I didn't know what to do.

"Go to school."

It felt like I had to physically shut off my brain in order to leave the house. I arrived, confused and in a fog, at school. I couldn't find Sophia, so I tried to shut everything out and pretend I wasn't there. By now, my teacher was used to me not doing work, so she didn't make fun of me this time.

At lunch, I sat alone with my back against the stone wall and picked at the dirt. I did my best to focus on the little ants and worms rather than the panic eating away at my insides. I didn't think I could have kept it up if Edgar hadn't shown up.

"Hi," he said, standing over me with his arms tucked up to his chest. "What's wrong?"

"My dad's dying," I blurted. I would have sobbed if the words had really come from my mouth.

"Oh."

In the silence, I blipped in and out of reality. The ants crawled across my sneakers.

Then, he continued, "It'll be okay. My mom's been dead for years, I'm turning out okay."

As he spoke, my vision blurred and I didn't quite realize I was crying until I tried to talk and all that came out was a weak sob. "I don't want him to die. He can't. I'm not ready."

His breath caught. "I didn't mean… I'm sorry."

I jumped up and stumbled as I ran away. I was running straight for the fence, so I climbed it, not thinking. A teacher yelled at me as I tore my tights on the top. I jumped down, landing heavily on all fours. I didn't dare look back. I just ran up the road, cutting between backyards until I was in my

driveway, tripping and skinning my knees on the gravel. I threw myself at the door, struggled with the lock and didn't bother to close it.

"Dad!"

He looked up at me blearily from the blankets. "Marnie?"

I crawled into bed with him, laying my head on his chest. He had always been bigger than me, always, but now he felt so small and frail. I couldn't be big for him. But I could close my eyes, listen to his heart, and sleep…

* * *

When Marnie ran away, I figured she'd come back. I waited all day to apologize. But she never did.

Donald had to hurry home to help on the farm, so I went home too.

I spent some time looking over my notes that I'd taken at the library. I tried to start putting together the pieces in my box. I had the motherboard, everything needed for the audio and visuals, and one bad fan. And it was too hard to construct without a case. I gave up quickly. Another trip to the library would be nice. But I needed to buy more supplies or I'd go nowhere.

I didn't want to go downstairs. I sat on my bed with the window open. I never noticed how much of Donald's land I could see. If I leaned out a bit, I could almost see his house.

Dinner was never cooked. Somehow, that made me feel sicker.

I debated going downstairs to check on Dad. I didn't want to make him angry, though. He might think I was asking for food. That would cost me later. So I waited upstairs. I wasn't sure what to do.

A car pulled into the Kilkenny's parking lot. Out came the busboy from the bar. He carried a big paper bag. Curious, I watched him walk up to our door. He knocked. Dad answered. Then he left.

He must have ordered delivery. My stomach grumbled. There had been nothing to pack for lunch today. Where did he get the money for this?

I waited for him to call me down. Then we sat at the kitchen table. I watched him eat steak, eggs, and toast. He ate slowly. I felt lightheaded. I could see in his eyes how much he loved this. I mostly hoped he couldn't see the resentment in mine. But a small part of me wanted him to hurt, too.

He handed me a piece of toast.

My heart leaped into my mouth.

"Do you not want it?"

"Yes," I said, nearly snapping, "yes, I do."

He sniffed. He scowled. But those eyes were smiling. "Greedy."

I clenched my teeth. All my insides were vibrating.

He stood up, brushing off his fingers. He put the toast back into the takeout container. And threw the whole thing in the garbage.

I wanted to scream. I wanted to throw this chair across the room. Maybe hit him. I didn't know what to do with my rage.

"Go to your room."

It took everything to slink up those stairs wordlessly.

I got to my room. Looked out the window. Instantly, relief washed over me. The dog was out on the grass. I hadn't seen it for days. Not since that night on the highway. I decided I wanted to thank it. It might like a treat. Even if it was a ghost. I checked the calendar. Waited a while. Then went downstairs. Dad was in the living room.

"I'm taking out the trash."

He looked at me apathetically. "You better not eat out of the trash again."

I flinched. It had been years. But I learned my lesson. "I won't."

"I'll wash your mouth out again, you filthy animal."

"I won't," I repeated, cowed. "I promise."

I fished the toast from the trash. It made a bit of noise. I dropped a crushed can of ginger ale. I cleaned it up. I hoped he connected the two sounds. I hoped he didn't think too hard. I hid the toast in the hand holding the bottom of the bag. Walked right past him. And out the door.

The air was cold. Smelled like winter. The dog looked right through me.

I put down the bag. It made enough noise to hide my whispers to the dog. I waved the piece of toast at it. It didn't seem to care. It whined. It looked like its heart was broken. Then it was gone. In its place came a thin snowfall.

Looking up at the clouds, I shoved the piece of toast down my throat.

* * *

Mom was furious that I skipped school. She didn't listen to my reasoning, she didn't care that it was for Dad. She just yelled at me because she had to stop her own class to come find where I went. She never yelled at me before.

She didn't send me to my room, but I went there and didn't come out. I ignored her calling me down for dinner. I'd been simmering for hours. I wouldn't know how to stop myself from boiling over if I had to see her face.

I was hungry when I finally climbed into bed. I didn't regret

skipping dinner, though. I closed my eyes and tried not to think about anything. It didn't work. The image of the ghost horse, of all things, kept flooding back into my mind. Why did Dad say ghosts were coming for me? He must have been talking about the horse. I didn't know any other ghosts. But how did he see it too, if it seemed like nobody else could?

As though it was summoned by my thoughts, I heard the mournful whinny of the horse from outside. I jumped out of bed and pressed my face to the window. There it was, near the road behind my house, its head raised to the snowing sky.

I had to go see it. If there's even a tiny chance to ask what my dad meant, I had to take it.

I threw on a sweater over my pajamas and hurried downstairs, trying to be quiet. Both my parents were sleeping and I didn't want to wake them. Even if Mom was being herself, she wouldn't let me go wandering around at night. Luckily, I was able to get out without them noticing.

It was dark, with very little light from the neighbor's houses to show my surroundings. But the horse was glowing so brightly, it somehow created a clear path from me to it. It never looked right at me, swinging its head from side to side and nickering sadly at the darkness. I followed its winding path up past two houses, back down through the long grass, then up behind the vet's. It made a tired beeline for the highway. A couple cars drove by and somehow didn't see it, or if they did, they didn't care. It came to stand in the middle of the road, glowing brighter than the paint lines, staring off in the direction of Sowridge.

Even though it was a ghost, I didn't want it to get hit by a car. Thinking quickly, I ran into the vet's.

My eyes still stinging from the harsh brightness, I said, "Can I get a carrot? Or anything? There's an animal walking out into

traffic!"

The receptionist looked up, confused. "An animal? What kind?"

I didn't reply, rushing back out into the night. The receptionist followed right behind me, a Ziploc bag of baby carrots in hand. But as we came up the hill to the stony shoulder of the road, there was no horse, ghost or not, in sight.

* * *

When I saw Marnie the next day, she was practically bursting. She told me and Donald that we should meet at lunch and talk.

I was worried it was about yesterday. When we met up, though, she told us about the ghost horse. She'd seen it last night. She followed it up to the highway, then it disappeared.

"Weird," I said. "The other night, I saw the ghost dog on the highway. And last night, I tried to give it a treat, but it didn't care and disappeared, too."

"Should we look for them together?" Marnie suggested. Sophia looked excited, but her voice was shy when she agreed.

"I have two walkie talkies. I'll give you two one, and Donald and I can have the other."

"Right. That way, we can both be looking at the same time, and talking to each other," Donald said.

"I'll draw a map," Marnie offered.

"Let's meet outside school at dusk," Sophia said.

"Sounds like a plan!"

* * *

Sophia was already at school when I rode up on my bike. She

was with the group of girls she hung out with when we weren't together, her secret club. Donald was there too, looking a little out of place with the gaggle of excited, giggling girls. I felt for him, but I was consumed with the joy of being in a big friend group again. I tried my best to keep up with their jokes as we waited for Edgar, bouncing on my toes and twirling my hair.

We waited until the sun had nearly set and he still didn't show up. Donald had to go home because he had to wake up early tomorrow, even though it'd be Saturday.

"I guess we can look on our own," Sophia said, mostly to me.

The other three girls weren't listening; they were taking turns listening to a CD on a Discman.

"Do you want to check out my CD collection?" I blurted. I couldn't help it.

One of them, I think her name was Dory, very briefly smiled at me and said, "Maybe later."

Sophia frowned at me and I felt like I'd been punched in the gut.

"I'm sorry," I whispered.

"It's whatever." She kicked some dead leaves. "Let's get going, okay?"

We walked around the neighborhood for a few minutes. I followed along on my map as best as I could. Sophia was leading us to the edge of the wooded area behind the town. I made sure my socks were pulled up high, even though it was probably too cold for ticks.

There was a thick ring of trees and brush between Pryeville and some grassy hills beyond. Even though we were going through a thinner patch, it still took a few minutes to cross. Dory and the other girls kept smashing through the undergrowth and snapping branches. It made me feel like they were

the ones from out of town, because I was doing a comparatively good job of staying quiet. Sophia was visibly frustrated, but she didn't speak up. They were ruining our night. I had to do something.

"Hey, you!" I huffed, not wanting to say the wrong names and have them laugh at me. "You're all being too loud! Why do you think you never see the horse, with all this racket you're making?"

They all stopped in their tracks.

Dory threw a branch. "Whatever," she said, sticking her tongue out at me. "This is stupid, anyway. Let's go to my place and prank call numbers in the phone book."

"Enjoy getting leaves in your hair," one of the other girls said, throwing a handful of dirty, dead leaves at Sophia and I.

We watched them crash away back to town. Sophia vibrated with an anger I could physically feel.

I reached out to her. "Sophia—"

She burst into tears and slapped my hand away. I couldn't do anything as she bolted away, but I followed her as soon as I got control of my body back. She shouted at me to leave her alone, so I stopped, right at the edge of the woods. I watched her run back home, then slunk away, feeling like my whole world was falling apart.

* * *

Tuesday early morning. Dad banged on my door. I was already awake. I weakly told him so. Getting up was hard. The world hurt. Spun away from me. Slowly got dressed. Downstairs.

"You're going to school today," Dad said.

"Okay." My throat was so dry.

"Now."

"Okay."

He watched me get my bag. Shoes. Jacket. Then followed me halfway there. Almost as though he was expecting me to run. But didn't want to get caught.

I sat in the cold yard. It was too early to go inside. The first teacher to arrive was surprised to see me. I spent the rest of the morning in the office. I even managed to nod off.

At lunch, Donald and Marnie were concerned for me. They asked me where I'd been.

I just said sorry. Something about Dad.

Marnie had to leave. Something about Sophia. I could barely hear.

It was really hard to stay awake. To stay here.

The bell rang to go home. It didn't feel like it was the end of the day. My head hurt too much to think. I could hardly walk. The floor kept rising. Rising up to my knees. Swallowing me whole.

I opened my eyes in the nurse's office. Donald's face was big and worried. Marnie and Sophia sat nearby, watching me.

"What happened?" I croaked.

"You fainted," Donald said.

"Have a juice box." Marnie shoved one in my face. "Nurse Tina left one for you."

Donald opened it for me. I drank it eagerly. I felt some of my strength return. It awoke a lot of hunger in me, though.

"We need to get you some food," Sophia said. Her voice was small, but she looked like she cared for me. "Does anyone have money to go to the diner?"

Both Donald and Marnie shook their heads.

"Okay, my house is the closest. Let's go."

Outside, it was later than I thought. We made our way to Sophia's house slowly. Donald had to help me walk. We had to take the fire escape up to the second floor. Her mom was doing a tour, so she wouldn't appreciate a bunch of teenagers running through the museum, Sophia said.

Her home was a small apartment, with a kitchenette and living room in one room. One door led to a bathroom. Another was closed. There was a small, curtained area beside the couch. On the couch was my boss.

Sophia sat me down at the small kitchen table. Donald sat with me. Marnie and Sophia looked through the fridge and cupboards. Sophia was being careful. Marnie was a whirlwind. She grabbed several jars of jam, pickles, and olives. She compared breads. She sniffed cheeses. I could tell Sophia didn't like it at first. But it was impossible not to laugh at her antics.

When she finally got Sophia to laugh, my boss turned up the TV.

She flinched.

"Keep it down," he said in the same gruff voice he used on me, "or I'll throw the lot of you out."

Marnie hurriedly gave me a sandwich. I ate it. I barely tasted it. Then Sophia brought us outside.

"Let's ghost hunt again tonight," Marnie suggested. She looked cautiously at Sophia.

She nodded, giving her a little smile.

Donald looked at me. His face was grim. "You'll be sleeping at mine tonight," he said protectively.

I gave a little nod.

Donald took me right to his house. We sat at the kitchen table while his mother heated up some leftovers for me. I tried to

tell her I wasn't hungry, but she wasn't having it.
His dad called my dad on the rotary phone in the living room.
It was a short conversation. I looked up at him with fearful eyes.
He smiled, his face creasing. "It's alright, boy. He didn't mind."
Somehow, that scared me more.

* * *

It was snowing, so I ran home to get a coat. Sophia followed me but didn't come up to my house. I opened the door and stepped into the kitchen, expecting Mom to ask where I'd been, but nobody noticed me. I found my coat under hers behind the door, but just when I was about to put it on, I heard talking from the living room.

"He's getting worse every day," Mom said. "I don't know what to do anymore."

"His condition is deteriorating, yes," the nurse said grimly. "We still have to test the samples I took today, but as it stands, we don't have answers for you. I'm sorry, Mrs. O'Connor."

Mom was silent for a long time. I stood still, feeling like I was between worlds: one with Sophia and Edgar and Donald, where the only problem was helping these ghost animals, and one with Mom and Dad and the nurse, where everything hung by a thinning thread.

"I don't know how I'll pay you tonight," Mom whispered. She was so quiet, I could barely hear her over the rush of blood in my ears. "We're struggling." Her voice broke into a sob. "I don't know— I don't think we can keep the house."

"It's okay," the nurse said, her voice warm and sad. "This appointment can be free."

I ripped the door open angrily and ran down the path to where Sophia was waiting for me.

"What's wrong?" she asked, her eyes wide.

"Nothing. Let's just go."

"Do you at least want my coat?"

"No," I snapped, then sighed. I wasn't mad at her. She didn't deserve that. "But thank you."

As we walked around the neighborhood, Sophia leading the way and telling me about how she used to do this all the time, I started cheering up. It was good to be around her, back in this world.

After a while, we still hadn't seen any sign of the horse. Just as I was thinking it would be nice to have spent a night with her, horse or not, the unmistakable sound of hoof beats surrounded us.

We looked around wildly, too stunned and excited to talk. We couldn't see it, but Sophia was able to track its movement by sound. We chased it, making sure to be quiet and calm, even though it was hard not to run blindly. I flapped my hands and twirled my hair to try to mitigate some of the energy.

When we finally did catch up to it, we were on the far edge of town and it was so dark. The only light was the horse, whose glow illuminated the snowflakes falling around us. I was freezing, beyond shivering, too enraptured to feel the cold. Sophia looked at me and slid her coat over my shoulders. The beautiful horse looked over its shoulder and right at me with its harrowing eyes. Then, almost as though it had given up, it turned and walked into the woods. We stayed until the light went out, and we were bundled in darkness and snow.

* * *

"Do you remember when we learned about the helhests and barghests?" Sophia said. We were all sitting together in the library's computer room. "I really think that's what these animals are. I think they're lost, looking for the old town they were supposed to protect."

Marnie hummed thoughtfully. "That makes sense. Every time I see the horse, it's either following me home from Mrs. Kane's, or it seems to be looking for something."

I nodded. "When I see the dog, it looks like it's lost. Even the night it led me to Donald's, it felt distracted."

"And they both walk towards the museum grounds," Donald added.

Marnie took a folded sheet of paper from her pocket. She smoothed it out on the table. She traced the path of the horse following her home. I leaned over Donald to trace the path back from the highway.

Sophia watched us with glittery eyes. "Towards the old town."

Marnie leaned her cheek against her hand. Her eyebrows were furrowed as she stared at the paper. After a while, she said, "You know, they look kind of lonely."

"What do you mean?" Donald asked.

"I think they might be looking for each other."

My heart jumped. "Yes," I said. "Yes, I really think so."

She shared a look with me that said something I couldn't put into words.

"I know what you mean," Sophia said, looking at Marnie. Her eyes held something so familiar.

I stared at my hands instead of at the smile I wanted to see on Donald's face.

"Let's try to lure them to each other," Donald suggested. "We could do it in teams, at the same time, like we were going to

the other night."

"We'll buy them treats!" Marnie said, bouncing in her chair.

"We can use your walkie talkies!" Sophia agreed, excited too.

"Let's go tomorrow night."

I swallowed hard.

Donald put his hand on my shoulder. "It's okay. We'll go together."

The girls stayed behind to hang out. Donald walked me across the churchyard to my house. The distance had never felt so far.

Up close, it became hard to keep going. I had to shut off my mind.

I'm just walking home from school. Just like any other day.

One foot. After the other.

"What the…?"

I looked up from my feet. In the small space between my house and the parking lot, there was a mountain. A mattress and bed frame. A desk and bookshelf. Clothes. Photographs. Boxes. A computer case. A motherboard. Video and sound cards. And one bad fan.

I ran. I tore through the boxes. Smashed. Bits of metal and plastic cut my hands. All of it smashed.

"No, no, no," I sobbed as the motherboard easily snapped in two in my hands. "No!"

All these months of work. All these months of working. All these months of…

The door slammed shut.

"Get the fuck off my lawn," Dad said. He was holding a beer. His eyes were narrowed.

Donald came up to me. Put a hand on my shoulder. I tried not to collapse.

"I said get out," he snarled. "No faggot's a son of mine."

My world spun out of focus. The ground hit my knees. Sharp and solid.

"No, no, let's get out of here, okay?" Donald said. He picked me up like a doll.

Dad laughed as we walked away. "And thanks for the four hundred bucks!"

* * *

The next morning, I had breakfast alone in the kitchen because Mom was passed out on the couch. I was old enough to make my own breakfast, and it wasn't like I was cooking anything, but it didn't feel right.

I'm only thirteen.

I wanted my mom and dad.

A knock at the door scared me out of my skin. I got up and parted the curtains. It was the nurse, so I let her in.

"Hi Marnie, is your mom around?"

I pointed to the living room as I grabbed my bag from the floor. I walked out the door before she could try to talk to me.

On the way to school, I cried. I didn't want anyone to know, so I ran until the tears dried up and my face was red from being out of breath.

In class, Sophia started passing me notes. I guess she noticed I wasn't feeling well. We chatted about music, books, her wanting a new bike, me wanting a big milkshake. When we got caught and she had to read that note out loud, the class laughed so much, but it didn't feel like they were making fun of me. I even laughed, too.

After school, she invited me to go to the grocery store to get some apples for the horse. We rode our bikes there, and I

wondered where Donald and Edgar were today.

* * *

In the morning, Donald and I sat at the kitchen table. His mom and dad were on the other side. His mom had been crying. "Honey, you're gonna stay with us now," she said, reaching across the table for my hand.

I let her take it. I tried to speak. Nothing came out.

"We'll need you to help out around the farm," his dad said. His voice was gruff, but his eyes were soft. "It won't be nothing too hard. Not til you're used to it. But you've got to earn your keep, same as Donald."

I flinched.

"It's not that bad," Donald said softly.

His mom nodded. "You don't need to worry about that man again," she said, "or anything like him."

They fed me stacks of pancakes. Then Donald and I went up to the attic. We dusted and swept. He moved the furniture. Nothing of mine was intact. There were a couple of shelves here, though. His grandfather's furniture. A rocking chair. A nice old dresser. And a desk.

We put away the clothes we'd managed to take. It wasn't very much, but it was okay. There was no bed, yet. Donald found the spare blankets and I put my pillow on the couch downstairs.

Then we went back up. The sun was streaming through the small, circular window. A patch of brightness fell upon the dark wood floor. I sank slowly. And I cried.

The floor creaked as he sat down. He put his arms around my shoulders. He held me. For a long time, it was quiet. And for

the first time, it was okay.
He pulled back when I did. He smiled. "Let's go to the vet's now," he said in that easy voice of his, "for some treats."
It was a long walk, but we walked together. We avoided Dad's house, cutting across the backyards near the closest pig farm. Then we came up from the back of the next one, and followed the road from there. Past the turn to school. Past the museum, the diner. Up into Pryeville where the bar was, then the bank. Then finally up the last stretch to the vet's. The whole time we didn't say a word to each other. Being there was enough.
In the vet's, Donald picked out a packet of dog treats. The receptionist looked excited as he rang them up. "Are you getting a dog?"
Donald handed over the couple dollars and smiled. "Maybe."

* * *

Donald and Edgar met us briefly outside the vet's. We went back to Donald's house together, where Edgar gave Sophia and I a walkie talkie and showed us how to use it. Donald said it's lucky they both survived Edgar's dad. I wanted to ask what that meant, but something told me to leave it.

We stayed there until sunset, since Donald's mom made us a big casserole for dinner. Edgar couldn't eat a lot of it, even though she took special care to make sure he felt like he was allowed to. The parents talked about going into town to buy some things for the new room, and I realized something must have happened at home. Something so bad that Edgar had to stay here now. I really wanted to ask now. Thankfully, it was time to go before I got a chance.

We left our bikes on their lawn and carried an apple each. We

walked all the way back to the other side of Pryeville, where we last saw the horse. It didn't take long to find it, with how much it glowed in the November dark. We made sure to approach it from the front, so it didn't spook. It didn't seem too concerned with us. It wandered along the edge of the woods, swishing its gossamer tail and sighing.

"Here, horsie," Sophia called, clicking her tongue and offering the apple.

It whinnied sadly and looked away.

I tried whistling, but it ignored me. Frustrated, I waved my arms and jumped. It still didn't care.

"Try throwing it the apple," Sophia suggested.

When it looked my way, I rolled the apple over. It did sniff it, but just gave me that mournful look and stepped over it.

"I don't know what to do," I said into the walkie talkie. "It's not responding to me. Over."

* * *

Donald and I walked side by side to the far end of Sowridge. Then we went even further. I thought that since the dog found me so far up the highway, it might come back if we went that way again. It might think I'm lost, too, like it is.

It didn't take long for my strategy to pay off. We found the dog walking in circles not far from where it had found me. Its glowing body wavered in the streetlights' pools. Donald stared at it, his eyes wide and his mouth set.

"Haven't you seen it?" I whispered.

"Never."

"Well," I crinkled the treat bag as I opened it, "there's a first for everything."

The dog didn't react to the noise. I guessed it had never heard something like that before, if it was the dog first buried at this settlement.

"Here, doggy," I called, waving a treat.

It looked at me and woofed sadly.

"Try throwing it," Donald said.

I nervously tossed the treat so it landed closer to us than the dog.

It didn't notice.

"Here, let me." Donald took another from the bag and threw it.

It landed right at its feet.

It paused. It sniffed the treat. My heart leaped. But then it stepped over it and wandered away.

My walkie talkie crackled.

"I don't know what to do," Marnie said. "It's not responding to me. Over."

"Neither. Let's call it a night," I said, feeling bad giving up but knowing there wasn't anything more we could do. "Over."

* * *

I came out of Mrs. Kane's house and there was Sophia, waiting for me on the step. She jumped right up and grabbed my hand before I could get a hello out, then we were running down the street.

"What's going on?" I asked, panting, as we stopped to catch our breath near my house.

"I have an idea!" She grinned and grabbed my hand again. "A brilliant idea. Let's get Edgar and Donald!"

We ran, only stopping a couple times, to Donald's house. We asked his mom where they were.

"All my men are in the field," she said with a wink. "They'll be back for dinner in half an hour. Do you girls want to help me cook?"

"Sure," Sophia said, but she sounded impatient.

There wasn't much cooking to do, so we washed a lot of dishes, set the table, and collected the carrot and potato peels to be given to the pigs. Sophia asked if we could listen to music, so she messed with the radio until there was jazz filling the whole house. We danced and laughed until the guys came back.

Dinner was a big roast ham with mashed potatoes, green beans, huge carrot medallions, and homemade bread rolls. As we sat down to eat, I was suddenly filled with sadness. I hadn't had a dinner like this in…

"Oh, Marnie, what's wrong?" Donald's mom gasped as I burst into tears.

I wiped my face with my napkin, trying not to sob. "It's just… I don't know. It's nothing."

She scooted her chair back. "Come here, honey. Come get a hug."

I got up, even though it felt like my problems were being put on display for everyone, and hugged her. She held me so close and wrapped me up in her arms. It felt like nothing was real but her hug. When she let me go, I felt better. Not all the way, but better.

* * *

Dinner went well, after that. We talked about school, and working on the farm. I was helping out here full time, aside from school, now. I'd quit my job the second my boss handed me my last paycheck. Donald's dad was going to take me to

buy everything I needed for my computer. He had to drive to the city for a bed and some clothes for me anyway. It was going to be more than the money I had, but he said I could work it off over the summer. He made sure that I knew I didn't have to if I wasn't healthy enough by then.

After the last couple days, I wasn't sure if I was physically cut out for the farm. There were a lot of bad smells to get used to, too. But eating a big, healthy dinner every night, plus breakfast and even lunch, was doing wonders for me. I felt better, physically and emotionally, than I had in years. Maybe ever. And making Donald smile was the best encouragement. These days, he didn't even mind me staring.

* * *

After dinner, Donald's mom got us to wash the dishes, but we did manage to steal away Donald and Edgar when we were done. Sophia finally told us her brilliant idea.

"I was thinking about the animals last night, and how they were buried in the old cemetery. We only know that because we found a collar and a halter buried like they were in a grave. And we have both of those, the real ones, in my museum." Her excitement was so visible that when she spoke, it was like a physical thing in the room with us. "We have to take them. They've gotta follow us if they know we're gonna lead them back to the town, right? They've gotta remember their own collar and halter!"

Edgar smiled from ear to ear. "I think you've gotta be right, Sophia."

"But isn't that stealing?" Donald asked.

"Not if we put them back before anybody notices. Then it's

just borrowing." She shrugged. "Besides, I have the key to open the cabinet they're in."

So Sophia went home to borrow the collar and halter. Edgar, Donald and I sat on the step. I was practically vibrating with anticipation. This had to be it.

* * *

When Sophia came running back across the library grounds, a plastic bag clutched in each hand, I knew this was it. We were going to finally bring these ghosts home.

She gave me one of the bags. Her face was very serious as she told me to be very careful with it.

"I will be," I said softly, taking it and holding it to my chest. "I promise."

We checked to make sure our walkie talkies were working, then we headed out.

* * *

I looked back over my shoulder as Sophia and I walked out across the library grounds. Edgar was looking too. We smiled and waved at each other and I knew we both felt how important this was.

We went the same way we went last time. We were quiet the whole time. Sophia didn't unwrap the halter until we found the horse. It stepped out of the woods and tossed its mane, pawing the ground with a shining hoof.

"We found it," Sophia whispered into the walkie talkie, "over."

* * *

Seeing Marnie smile, I knew this was going to work. Donald and I took the same route we took last time. We didn't say much the whole time. There wasn't anything to say, after all.

When we got to the edge of Sowridge, the dog was there. Like it was waiting for us.

Sophia's voice crackled through the walkie talkie, telling us that they found the horse.

Donald replied.

I took a deep breath and unwrapped the collar.

Instantly the dog's ears were up, its eyes focused on me. It stepped forward without any caution, but there was something like disbelief on its pitch black face.

* * *

"We found the dog. Over."

I opened my mouth to speak, but thought better.

Sophia trembled all over. She tapped my arm to get my attention, then handed me the halter delicately.

I held it out to the horse.

It snorted, its breath too cold to make clouds in the air. It walked towards me, ears pricked, entirely focused on me and the halter. I took a step back, it took a step forward.

I glanced at Sophia, trying not to flap my hands in excitement.

She grinned and whispered into the walkie talkie, "It's working! Over!"

* * *

Donald almost forgot to respond to Sophia because we were

both so excited that it was working. We had picked up the pace as soon as we were confident that the dog wouldn't stop following us, and we were making good progress down the highway. I didn't want to turn around, so I couldn't go too fast, though. Donald and Sophia were in steady communication, updating each other back and forth on our progress.

* * *

I could barely believe what I was seeing as the horse started trotting after us. We stumbled backwards, Sophia leading me to make sure I didn't fall, me keeping my eyes on the horse, the horse keeping its eyes on the halter. We passed the grocery store and the butcher's, squeezed between the houses behind Mrs. Kane's property and up and around her fence.

* * *

We soon had come to the back of Kilkenny's. We were going to come around the bend in the road and see Dad's house. My steps became weaker. Shakier. I didn't think I could do this anymore.

Donald whispered my name. Put his hand on my shoulder from behind. "We're gonna be okay."

* * *

We slipped between my house and my neighbor's. I peered in the lit kitchen window to see Mom's face, her eyes huge with wonder. I couldn't contain a smile and a jump. The horse half reared, kicking its front legs and whinnying.

* * *

The final stretch was easy. We were out in the open, and it felt like everyone in the whole world was watching us. But I'd never been so calm.

When we reached the low fence surrounding the museum lands, the dog broke away from us and leaped over it.

"Yes," Donald said under his breath, grabbing my hand and squeezing it.

In the distance, I could just see the horse leaping over the other fence where the girls were. Both animals took a moment to look around, like they couldn't believe where they'd ended up.

"Look," Donald said, nodding to the girls. They were heading to the museum.

We followed them without another word. We huddled next to the building and watched as the horse and dog saw each other.

The air began to shimmer softly. Then, as though a blanket was being lifted over the field, all the foundations of the old buildings began to glow faintly white, just like the ghosts. Tall shapes rose from the ground, coming into focus as the farmhouse, the barn. And behind us, the museum was lovingly held by the ghost of the first church and its graveyard.

The four of us turned in time to see the dog meet the horse. They walked to each other slowly. The horse bowed its head and the dog raised its muzzle. Their noses touched, and they faded away with the wind.

* * *

When I woke up the next day, I had to stay in bed for a moment. I didn't know how to talk to Mom about what happened.

Eventually, I decided I would just say nothing. She just had a weird dream. It's not like she's been sleeping great anyway.

Downstairs, Mom was awake. She was cooking an omelet, and singing as she did.

I stopped at the bottom of the stairs and gawked.

"Good morning, Marnie," she said, looking over her shoulder with a beaming smile. "How did you sleep?"

"G-good?" I looked around. The table was set for two, as usual, but Dad wasn't in their room. "Where's Dad?"

She shimmied the omelet onto a plate, then motioned for me to follow her. She went into the bathroom and drew back the curtains. Outside, Dad was hanging up a bird feeder in the tree beside our house. My jaw dropped. He looked up at us and gave a big, happy wave and I saw that he didn't even have his oxygen tank.

I couldn't handle that. Panic rocked through me. I dug around in my pocket for where I'd shoved my envelope of money, then thrust it into Mom's hands.

"It's okay, Marnie," she said, smiling with sadness behind her eyes. "It's okay."

"Please!" I cried, tears running down my cheeks. "I don't wanna lose our home. I don't wanna lose Dad!"

She pulled me into a tight hug. Her fingers ran through my hair as she said, "We won't, Marnie, we won't. We're not going anywhere. We're okay. Your dad's okay."

I sobbed hard into her chest, my arms in a vice grip around her ribs. When I finally could pull away, she knelt down to my height. She wiped my face and held my hands, looking deep into my eyes with a love and peace I hadn't seen since Dad first got sick.

I wanted to ask how, how is everything okay, this didn't make

any sense, but I couldn't find the strength.

"If you really want to spend that money now," Mom said softly, "you can pay for your own breakfast with Sophia. She called right before you woke up, asking permission to take you to the diner."

"Oh," I breathed.

She kissed my forehead and told me to go change into something nicer.

I ran upstairs and put on my nicest clothes: a plaid skirt, black leggings, and a green flannel over a crisp white t shirt. Then I sat in the third chair, chatting with Mom and Dad as they ate together. I got so caught up in our conversation that I forgot Sophia was coming until she knocked on the door.

"There's your friend," Dad said. He patted me on the back as I got up. "You two have fun."

"We will," I said, and threw my arms around him. It was all I could do to not cry again.

I answered the door when Sophia knocked a second time. She was standing in the shade of the back porch, snow on her boots. She looked beautiful in a white skirt and red blouse, and warm in her jacket.

"Hi," I said, feeling plain.

"Hi," she said, reaching for my hand. "You look beautiful."

I met her halfway, our fingers intertwined. "You do, too."

The End

About the Author

Laika Wallace (she/he/it/sie) is a dog who died in space. No wait, that's just Laika. Laika Wallace is a disabled Indigenous horse wo/man whose many ghosts haunt the streets of "Canada" creating poetry, fantasy & sci fi novels, music, and mixed media artwork, exploring what it means to be alive in many forms.

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